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Domestic Workers in India

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Why in News: Police in Gurgaon arrested a couple recently for allegedly torturing and assaulting a minor girl who they had hired as a domestic help.

The State of Domestic Workers in India

Under the ILO Convention 189, a domestic worker is “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship”.

A domestic worker may work on full-time or part-time basis; may be employed by a single household or by multiple employers; may be residing in the household of the employer (live-in worker) or may be living in his or her own residence (live-out).

Domestic workers constitute a significant portion of total employment in the informal sector.

According to the latest data on the e-Shram portal, around 8.8 percent of the registered 8.56 crore informal sector workers fall in the category of domestic workers.

Domestic workers are the third-largest category of workers after agriculture and construction.

According to an International Labour Organisation report, India officially employs as many as 4.75 million people as domestic workers. However, the true numbers, the ILO states is considered to be between 20 million to 80 million workers.

Girls and women make up the significant majority of domestic workers. Between 2000 and 2010, women accounted for seventy-five % of the increase in the total number of domestic workers in India. In 2009-2010 more than two-thirds of all domestic workers in India were employed in urban areas

The majority of domestic workers in India are illiterate/ minimally educated and low-skilled. They are also one of the poorest and most exploited groups of workers in the country.

Domestic workers in India are forced to be dependent on their employers because they have no legal protection as workers under India’s labour laws, and no bargaining power due to their situations of poverty, illiteracy and low-skills.

Issues of Domestic workers in India

A domestic worker may be working in a country of which she/he is not a national.

Nearly 90% of domestic workers in India are women or children (especially girls), ranging from ages 12 to 75 and it is estimated that 25% among them are below the age of 14. The majority of domestic workers are illiterate.

They are engaged in tasks such as cooking, washing, and cleaning, which are traditionally seen as women’s work and considered subservient in nature.

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In India, the stigma linked to domestic work is heightened by the caste system, since tasks such as cleaning and sweeping are associated with the people belonging to the 'so-called' low castes.

Domestic workers are commonly referred to as 'servants' and 'maids' which has resulted in their feelings of insecurity and inferiority. This has further added to the undignified status awarded to the services provided by them.

Domestic Workers are highly exploited and denied just wages and humane working conditions. They are paid well below the minimum wages for unskilled or semi-skilled workers.

The vast majority of live-in domestic workers work a minimum of 15 hours a day, seven days a week. Part-time workers often work in 3-4 different houses for nearly 8-10 hours every day. The working hours of domestic workers can go from 8 to over 18 hours a day. Wages, leave facilities, medical benefits, and rest time are at the employer's mercy.

They are often victims of suspicion. If anything is missing in the house, they are the first to be accused with threats, physical violence, police interrogation, conviction, and even dismissal.

A great number of live-in domestic workers are recruited from rural or tribal areas. They have to adapt to an alien environment, culture, and language.

Domestic Workers experience a tremendous sense of loneliness because of the solitary nature of the work. This loneliness is compounded by the fact that most have no or very little time off and they are unable to communicate with distant friends and relatives.

The recently passed Labour Code on Social Security does not cover households. As a result, domestic workers cannot avail of any social security and insurance benefits, provident fund, maternity benefit or gratuity.

Draft National Policy for Domestic Workers

Ministry of Labour and Employment issued official circular on draft National Policy for Domestic Workers

The new draft policy however does not prescribe a minimum wage for a domestic worker, although the earlier draft a couple of years ago had proposed a minimum salary of Rs 9,000 per month for the skilled full-time domestic help along with a host of benefits including social security cover and mandatory leave.

The policy intends to set up an institutional mechanism to social security cover, fair terms of employment, grievance redressal and dispute resolution.

It provides for recognising domestic workers as a worker with the right to register themselves with state labour department or any other suitable mechanism.

It also aims to expand the scope of existing legislation, policies and schemes to grant domestic workers rights that are enshrined in laws for other category of workers including minimum wage, equal remuneration etc.

The policy will also promote the rights for them to organise and form their own unions/associations and affiliate with other unions/associations.

The policy will also provide for model contract of employment with well defined period of work and rest.

It also aims to regulate the recruitment and placement agencies by respective governments through formulation of a policy. It will also have a tripartite implementation committee at centre, state and district levels.

The Way Ahead

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The measures to recognise the value of domestic labour and shift gender norms to rebalance the burden of unpaid work are

First, investing in the care economy and women can be recruited for a majority of jobs created under such schemes.

Second, there is a need to formalise working conditions, establish minimum wages, and working hours for India's 80 million domestic workers

Third, there is a need to change social attitudes. Social norms casting women in the role of homemaker discourage men from taking responsibility in the home.

Conclusion

For India to bridge the gender gap in women's labour force participation and add nearly \$770 billion to the GDP by 2025, domestic labour must be valued, and become a shared responsibility. Indian men need to become equal partners in sharing the load of unpaid work so that India's women can join the paid workforce and build an independent identity outside the confines of their homes.