

Maids and cooks: Pakistan's unheard

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Household workers face abuse and exploitation in plain sight

I was handed a glass of water while Salma* moved the extra clothes from the charpoy and adjusted herself right in front of me, fixing her shawl and making sure I was comfortable where I was sitting.

After a few minutes of small talk about the weather, she asked me about my research and I explained it to her. Her next question left me a little confused and rather annoyed at myself for not being able to answer it coherently. Salma* asked if my research was helping my key subjects in any substantial way. The truth is, it wasn't. This simply was a task that I was supposed to perform in order to get a degree that would validate my intellect of four years. However, I did see this task as a way of acknowledging and getting to know about female domestic workers who have been a major force behind the growing informal economy of Pakistan even as their labour remains hidden and invisible.

Salma* later on mentioned how her employer, who is a social worker and a human rights activist at an NGO, often conducts similar activities at her home where several important people gather to talk on matters regarding the plight of the marginalised, presenting solutions and policies while Salma and other helpers in the adjacent room cook, clean and work all day in preparation of these events for them to go smoothly and undisturbed.

Domestic service is the largest source of employment in the informal sector, mainly performed by women and children. According to International Labour Organization (ILO), there are approximately 8.5 million domestic workers in Pakistan. Due to the informal nature of this work, it is considered an exclusively private affair of a household.

A point of interest in the subject of domestic service is that the employer and employee are generally both women. This relationship between the employer and her servant indicates how subordination is not only gender specific but mainly present due to their differing class standing/status. Patriarchy denotes a woman's primary role as a caregiver and in paid domestic service, this is outsourced to another woman - downplaying her labour as an innate quality of hers which further perpetuates the gendered division of labour.

Men and women in all upper and most middle-class sections benefit from the labour of domestic workers, which goes highly undervalued and underpaid. Since domestic labour occurs at the household; a personal space of the employer, it leaves them in precarious working conditions and vulnerable to exploitation, harassment and abuse. There had been no legal framework in place that protected domestic workers as they did not fall under the legal definition of a worker until January 2019, when Punjab Assembly passed the Punjab Domestic Workers Act. The Act regulates wages, provide health and social security cards as well as some measures to reduce workers' exploitation at the place of employment. However, the law remains unenforced/non-operational.

The capitalist/free-market economy relies heavily upon the labour of working class women especially those who perform domestic labour/care work. Women are the largest contributors to the care

economy and the acknowledgment they receive is far from adequate. This exacerbates a patriarchal and capitalist loop of exploitation. It is important to understand that the increasing economic inequality is forcing more women to seek employment with less than minimum wages and poor social safety. Most of them find work in informal sectors putting them at great risk of exploitation from their employers.

Despite the irregularities in the system, which fails to protect these informal workers, a Domestic Workers' Union has been around for some time. My encounter was with some of the union members from areas around Begumpura in Lahore. These domestic workers assemble in the courtyard of a local shrine and have a close-knit community building on their shared economic grievances. Some of the union leaders were registering domestic workers as employees - through an Android app launched by Punjab Employees Social Security Institution (PESSI). This app guarantees registration of domestic workers in the Punjab and issuance of social security cards on priority basis.

As promising as the idea of an online regulatory system sounds, it still lacks in efficiency and ignores the demographics of a socio economically stressed society. Many domestic workers lack access to information regarding the rights they are entitled to. Since no agency has been set up to ensure compliance with the Domestic Workers Act, it is deemed to be a non-functional law. It is vital for the society to recognise the labour of these women and most importantly, for these unions to organise on community level to pull them out of invisibility.

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