

India: Victims of patriarchy, 50% female domestic workers deserted by their husband

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Domestic workers are unorganized and mostly unskilled. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), “domestic workers” perform their work in or for one or more households within an employment relationship. The International Labour Organization (2015) estimated that ‘among 67 million domestic workers across the globe, 80% are women’. Women’s economic participation increases whether they are educated or not. It is a positive and significant indication of women’s empowerment. Women domestic help engage with work within the homes of their employers as part-time or full-time workers.

The ILO includes tasks like cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening, driving family, nourishing children and elderly persons, etc. It has been observed that poor and illiterate or semi-literate female members are doing the job of domestic help. They are unaware of their rights and privileges. They have to face many unseen and hidden minor and major problems in their family and at work.

The scenario of female domestic help in Kolkata shows that a major portion of the working population has been occupied. It has become an integral part of Bengali households. The economically better-off families have to depend on domestic help (from economically weaker sections of society) for the smooth functioning of their daily lives.

These domestic helps come from the neighbouring suburban areas through local trains on a daily basis. A significant number of them travel from rural areas to urban areas for local training in a very distressing situation. Due to the lack of various data, the estimation of their total population is very difficult.

It has been noted that a majority of workers in Kolkata are the only earning members in their family and are compelled to work. Their earnings are very low compared to their work load. It has been recorded that these female workers are either dismissed by their husbands or they are victims of cruelty and violence in their family. In many cases, their husbands left them after a second marriage. When their husbands are with them, they are either jobless or they do their job for their own entertainment.

A significant number of them have to bear all expenses for their counterparts. Their earnings are only for household management. They incur very little or no expense for their own purposes. From interviews with a group of 20 female domestic helpers, it has been assumed that they were the only earning members of their households, with 4-5 members. Among them, 50% were deserted by their husband. The rest of them lived with their husbands, who made no contribution to their families. Even so, they had to bear the expense of their liquor daily. Their monthly earnings were about Rs 5,000–6,000, which was less than their family’s needs, including their children’s education, health, and so forth. So, they had to borrow a loan from either the Bandhan group through SHG members or private borrowers at high interest.

Consequently, their future is difficult because they have little scope to come out of their economic crisis from governments. They get rations at a discount rate, and all of them get the facility of “Laxmi Bhandar (Rs. 500–1000) per month from the state government.

In fact, women’s participation in the workforce does not secure their own economic lives. Their lives are devoted to their family members because they are the ultimate lovers of their family. They try to restore households with their end means. But the male exploitation is continuing. So, gender equity in all terms is questioned. Are patriarchal dominance and exploitation not strengthened by matriarchal support?

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