



Living And Working Conditions Of Domestic Workers In West Bengal: A Case Study Of English Bazar Municipality

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Abstract

In India, domestic workers are an integral part of workers engaged in the unorganized economy. Like everyone else, they also face a lot of issues which need to be properly addressed in India, especially in West Bengal. English Bazar Municipality has been selected as a case study due to its status as one of the largest and oldest municipalities in North Bengal, characterized by a significant need for domestic labor and offers employment opportunities mostly for women. This research work is based on the Primary data that has been gathered from one hundred respondents across several wards via a structured schedule, supplemented by secondary data to achieve a more comprehensive conclusion.

The study sought to examine the living and working conditions of domestic workers, emphasizing their socio-economic status, employment trends, wages and access to social welfare programs. The research shows that illiteracy, economic vulnerability, lack of formal employment, low household income and unskilledness drive them to engage in domestic work.

The results show that domestic workers face a lot of challenges such as low income, long working hours, job insecurity and lack of access to healthcare. It also reveals that the majority of them do not get any help from the state and union governments' welfare programs because they don't have proper knowledge and guidance. The government needs to do a lot to enhance their quality of life and society should stop treating them unfairly.

Key Words: Domestic Workers, discrimination, minimum wages, social security

Introduction

According to Census of India- 2011, 47,81,355 women are engaged in domestic work in India out of which West Bengal has a population of 5,49,335 domestic workers (11.49%), it ranks thirds in the country only after Maharashtra with 9,92,040 (20.75%) and Tamil Nadu 6,05,169 (12.66%). In the English Bazar Municipality, a significant number of women are engaged in domestic work. Despite their remarkable contributions to household functioning, they face bad living and working conditions including low income, absence of job security and lack of social security. The study seeks to critically examine their socio-economic conditions and the challenges they encounter, offering recommendations to enhance their quality of life. The study will also generate data for policymakers, local authorities and other organizations to make laws and schemes, guaranteeing their social security and wellbeing.

After a thorough analysis of literature on domestic workers, we found that most of the research work has emphasized on bigger cities, ignoring smaller urban areas like English Bazar Municipality. There is a

lack of research work regarding the challenges faced by domestic workers in these areas. So this research paper intends to bridge these gaps by offering a very localized and micro-level analysis.

Methodology

The primary data has been used for this research. The data was collected from 100 respondents employed as domestic workers across several wards of English Bazar Municipality in the District of Malda of West Bengal through a schedule by employing snowball sampling methodology. The secondary data also has also been utilized to enhance its efficacy.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the various factors push them to engage in the domestic works
2. To critically examine their service conditions and wages and other benefits
3. To examine the benefits of social security they receive from the government.
4. To evaluate the challenges encountered during their employment
5. To provide recommendations for improving their working conditions, guaranteeing minimum pay and social security.

Laws and Welfare Programs for Domestic Workers

It's important to highlight that there is no specific law for protection of domestic workers' rights passed by the Indian Parliament. They fall under unorganised workers. A number of acts have been passed by the Union Parliament such as the Minimum Wages Act 1948, the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008, the Code on Wage 2019 for their social security and well being. Following these acts, the government of India started a scheme called E-shram, mandatory registration of all unorganised workers, providing benefits of 2 lakh accident insurance, Rs 3000 per month after the age of 60.

In West Bengal, two important acts West Bengal Unorganised Sector Women's Welfare Act, 2007 and the State Assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for Unorganised Workers provide social security, provident fund and health assistance to unorganised workers. Following these two significant acts, the government introduced Samajik Suraksha Yojana in 2017 by adding Rs 25/ per month on his contribution of same amount, in 2020 the government decided to waive off the beneficiary contribution of 25/ and renamed it as Bina Mulya Samajik Suraksha Yojana

Table No.01 Age Group of Domestic Workers

Age Group in Years	Persons	Percentage
14-18	13	13%
19-25	12	12%
26-35	22	22%
36-45	23	23%
46-60	13	13%
>60	17	17%
Total	100	100%

Women engaged in domestic work span several age groups, from 14 to over 60 years old. Seventeen are senior citizens, fifteen are teenagers. Twenty three, the biggest number of domestic workers, twenty three are aged between 36 and 45, while twenty two of them are between 26 and 35 years. Thirteen women are aged between 46-60 and ten are aged between 21 and 25.

Table No. 02 Literacy Late among Domestic Workers

Level	Persons	Percentage
Illiterate	27	27.00%
Primary	33	33.00%
Upper Primary	37	37.00%
Matriculation	3	3.0%
Higher Secondary	0	0.0%
Graduation and above	0	0.0%
Total	100	100.00%

Table 02 indicates that none of them completed graduation, not even higher secondary. Only three have passed matriculation, thirty seven of them studied in high schools but dropped out between and 33 of them left study at primary level because of economic vulnerability or early marriage. The remaining 27% of them are illiterate.

Table No. 03 Marital Status of Domestic Workers

Marital Status	No	Percentage
Currently married	46	46%
Unmarried	08	8.0%
Widowed	21	21%
Divorced	05	5.0%
Separated	20	20%
Total	100	100%

Only 8% of them are unmarried who started the work at an early age due to circumstantial compulsion. The remaining are married, 46% of them are currently living with their spouses while 21% have lost their spouses, living either alone or with their children. 5% are divorced, while 20% are separated. A significant observation is that separation among them is prevalent due to early marriages, extramarital affairs of their spouses, alcoholism and crucially the absence of registration of their marriages under various marriage acts which facilitates separation and unofficial divorce.

Table No. 04 Causes Driving into Domestic Work

Reasons	Persons	Percentage
Economic Vulnerability	42	42.00%
Low household income	23	23.00%
Scarcity of Formal Employment Opportunities	10	10.00%
To utilize unproductive time	05	05.00%
Low Skill Requirement	04	04.00%

Limited access to education	10	10.00%
To be self-dependent	06	06.00%
Total	100	100.00%

Table 04 highlights that various factors are responsible for driving those women into domestic work. Economic vulnerability forced 42% of them, where no one is there in the family to earn because of widowhood, separation, parents or spouse are not able to work for livelihood or spouse are alcoholic. 23% of them are engaged to contribute to the family due to low household income. 10% engaged because of a lack of formal empowerment opportunities while 4% work as there is no skill required. 10% of them consider lack of education as a factor while 6% of them intend to be independent.

Table No. 05 Monthly Income of Domestic Workers

Range	Persons	Percentage
1000-2000	26	26.00%
2001-4000	30	30.00%
4001-6000	19	19.00%
6000-8000	18	18.00%
8001-10000	05	05.00%
>10000	02	02.00%
Total	100	100.00%

Their average monthly income ranges from four thousand to five thousand here. Two respondents earn a maximum of twelve thousand each month. Twenty-six individuals earn between 1000 and 2000, while thirty others earn exclusively between 2001-4000 each month. Full-time caregivers for children, the elderly or those who work in multiple households, make over six thousand per month whereas part-time workers do not exceed five thousand.

Table No. 06 Per Day Working Hours

Working Hours	Persons	Percentage
1-2	7	07.00%
2-3	11	11.00%
3-5	42	42.00%
5-8	14	14.00%
8-10	22	22.00%
>10	4	04.00%

Upon examining their daily working hours, we discovered that 19 full-time caregivers and 3 others employees work between eight to ten hours, while four individuals exceed ten hours each day. 7% and 11 % of them work for only 1-2 & 2-3 hours respectively, primarily within a single family. 42% and 14% of them are employed for 3-5 & 5-8 hours respectively, primarily between two or more houses.

Table No. 07 Categories of Work

Categories	Persons	Percentage
Caring Children	12	12.00%
Caring Elderly	3	03.00%
Caring Sick	10	10.00%
Cooking	31	31.00%
Sweeping, Cleansing utensils, Washing cloths	44	44.00%
Total	100	100.00%

Their works can be primarily categorized in two, caregiving and housework which includes cooking, sweeping and laundry. Once more, there are three subcategories; tending to youngsters, the elderly and ill individuals. The majority of them work around the house; for example, 44% of them sweep, clean kitchenware and wash clothes, and 31% cook. Of the remaining 25%, 12%, 3%, and 10% are caring for children, the elderly and the ill respectively.

Table No. 08 Number of Households per Worker

Household	Persons	Percentage
Single Household	35	35.00%
Two Households	42	42.00%
Three Households	19	19.00%
More than 3 Household	04	04.00%
Total	100	100.00%

When we looked at how many homes a person works in, we found that 35% of them only work in house. The majority of them provide care, therefore they don't have time for further jobs. Even so, three people work in other homes to supplement their income. Of them, 42% work in two homes, 19% in three homes and 4% in more than three. It's interesting to note that the category of work may vary from one home to another.

Table No.09 Working Period

Period in Years	Persons	Percentage
Less than 1 year	18	18.00%
1-3	26	26.00%
4-7	31	31.00%
8-12	12	12.00%
13-20	7	07.00%
Above 20 years	6	06.00%
Total	100	100.00%

Upon examining the length of their professional careers, we discovered that 18% commenced employment within one year, whilst 6% have been engaged in labor for almost twenty years. Twenty-six individuals have a job tenure ranging from 1 to 3 years. Seven individuals have been employed for a duration of 13 to 20 years. Twelve individuals have been employed for a duration ranging from eight to twelve years.

Table No. 10 Employment Finding Sources

Source	Persons	Percentage
Self	75	75.00%
Through a registered Agency	16	16.00%
Through an unregistered Agency	9	09.00%
Total	100	100.00%

During the survey, we discovered that a significant portion are employed through agencies either registered (16%) or unregistered (9%). A registered agency operates in compliance with established norms and regulations, maintaining accurate work records whereas an unregistered agent predominantly does its business via telephone, lacking a physical office and sufficient record management. The majority are engaged in the care of children, the elderly, or the infirm. 75% of them secure employment independently without the involvement of intermediary, primarily in roles such cooking, cleaning, washing dishes etc.

Table No. 11 Social status

Items	Persons	Percentage
No equal status	17	17.00%
Somehow equal status	20	20.00%
equal status	63	63.00%
Total	100	100.00%

About 84% of Domestic workers live in the slums or suburbs and remaining 16% are inhabitants/residents of main urban localities. Slums dwelling Domestic workers never face any discrimination there because most of the residents are associated with the same profession. But the workers of other areas feel humiliated since they are compelled to do the work and their relatives may not be engaged in these activities.

Table No. 12 Behaviour of Employers

Items	Yes	No	Total
Sharing foods/cloths	72	28	100
Payment deduction	19	81	100
Offering off days	3	97	100
Bonus	84	16	100
Eating foods together	7	93	100
Restricting entry to specific areas of the house	15	85	100
Separate utensils 28 for workers	28	72	100

How the employers treat domestic workers, we discovered that most of them maintained amicable and cordial connections. For example, 72% of them frequently share food and clothing, and 84% of them pay bonuses every year or every six months. Interestingly, 85% of them do not impose any restrictions on their access to specific areas of the house while 72% do not keep separate utensils and 81% of them do not withhold payment when an employee is unable to report to work for legitimate reasons. However, they are not liberal in other areas. For example, just 7% of them occasionally eat meals together, and 3% offer weekly off days as they like to prepare their own meals and spend quality time with family members on the weekends, and want to intend to give their employees a vacation.

Table No. 13 Benefited from Governments' Programs

Programs	Knowledge		Benefited	
E-Shram	Full-	37%	Full-	18%
	Partial-	25%	Partial-	6%
	No-	38%	No-	76%
BM-SSY	Full-	10%	Full-	13%
	Partial	15%	Partial	9%
	No	75%	No	78%
Laksmi Bhandar	Full	63%	Full	95%
	Partial	20%	Partial	0.0%
	No	17%	No	05%
	Full	54%	Full	19%

Swasto Sathi	Partial	27%	Partial	16%
	No	19%	No	65%

Whenever getting benefited from welfare programs of state and union governments is concerned, very few domestic workers got benefited as only 18% fully benefited, 6% partially benefited and 76% never benefited. BM-SSY has the same situation, only 13% and 9% fully and partially benefited while 78% never benefited. Swasto Sathi has the same story with just 19% beneficiary, 16% partial and 65% not benefited from it. The main reason behind non-benefiting is lack of knowledge about these welfare programs as 75% of them have no clue about BM-YY, 15% and 10% have partial and full information, while 38% have no knowledge, 25% have partial and 37% have full information. But Lakshmi Bhandar has a different scenario as 95% of them are its beneficiaries and just 5% could not benefit.

Suggestions

After a critical analysis of the data gathered from all respondents, we are going to give below suggestions for improving their quality of life.

1. The government should fix the minimum wage by a law and strictly implemented.
2. Working hours to be limited
3. Alternate income sources to be generated by the government and trained accordingly.
4. They should not be discriminated against based on their profession.
5. Written contract to be implemented. Adequate compensation to be ensured if the workers lose their jobs.
6. Payment should not be deducted if they take leave on the ground of sickness, family emergency and festive occasions.
7. Marriage registration is required to minimize separation and divorce proportion among these workers.
8. The governments of the union and the state need to make comprehensive laws for ensuring social security and minimum wages.
9. The employers should change their negative and discriminatory attitudes towards them.

Conclusion

The socio-economic conditions of domestic workers in West Bengal, especially in English Bazar Municipality are exceedingly dire. Numerous inescapable factors necessitate their involvement in this field. They do not receive a commensurate compensation despite their considerable suffering, effort, and time investment.. Job security, minimum pay and societal respect are prevalent but critical concerns they urgently require. However, they are consistently neglected by the state and central government. Their contributions to society should not be underestimated and must not be subjected to exploitation, discrimination or abuse. They deserve a respectable life as others do. So govts and other stakeholders must devote significant attention to enhancing their quality of life.

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