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Female Domestic Workers in India: Invisible Workforce and SDGs

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ABSTRACT: -

This paper examines the critical yet under-recognised role of female domestic workers in India within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of policy documents, the study highlights the socio-economic challenges and gender-specific vulnerabilities these workers face. The paper further analyses how the inclusion of female domestic workers aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in terms of gender equality, decent work, and social protection. By highlighting the intersection of domestic labour with sustainable development, the paper advocates for comprehensive policy reforms and better labour rights to enhance the well-being of this marginalised workforce, ensuring their contributions are recognised and valued in India's journey toward achieving the SDGs.

Context-

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2018), domestic workers are defined as individuals engaged in household tasks for pay or remuneration. Their work encompasses a wide array of services within the domestic sphere, including sweeping, cleaning, laundry, caregiving, cooking, driving, and even security-related responsibilities. In the Indian context, data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2012) estimates that approximately 3.9 million individuals are employed as domestic workers, of whom at least 2.6 million are women. This indicates not only the feminised nature of the sector but also highlights the critical role women play in sustaining domestic economies through largely informal and undervalued labour.

The rise in domestic workers in India is closely linked to industrialisation and urbanisation, which have driven unskilled rural migrants, especially women, to cities in search of better livelihoods. Many find work in the informal urban economy, particularly in the expanding service sector. While domestic work offers employment and potential stability, its informal, unregulated nature often results in poor working conditions, low pay, and vulnerability to exploitation. This paper highlights the isolated and undervalued status of domestic work in India, emphasising the structural barriers that prevent domestic workers from being recognised and protected as formal workers.

Problem of Data

One of the major challenges in addressing the issues faced by female domestic workers in India is the lack of reliable, comprehensive, and up-to-date data. Domestic work is largely informal and takes place in private households, making it difficult to monitor and regulate. As a result, domestic workers are often left out of official labour statistics and employment surveys. The available data, such as that from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), is outdated and fails to capture the full scale and diversity of domestic work, especially part-time, live-out, or migrant workers. The absence of gender-disaggregated and region-specific data further complicates policy-making and the implementation of targeted welfare measures. This data gap reinforces the invisibility of domestic workers in both the labour market and public policy discourse, hindering progress toward ensuring their rights and inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Objectives-

- To Analyse Socio-Economic conditions and challenges faced by Female Domestic Workers in India.
- To evaluate the alignment of the status and treatment of female domestic workers with relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- To recommend policy measures and strategies for the formal recognition, protection, and empowerment of female domestic workers in line with the SDG framework.

National Laws Concerning Domestic Workers in India

Minimum Wages Act, 1948 (Varies by state)

- Some states (like **Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, and Jharkhand**) have **notified domestic work** under this act.
- In these states, domestic workers are entitled to **minimum wages**, rest periods, and leave.
- **Other states have not included domestic workers**, so protection is inconsistent.

Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976

- Protects domestic workers (often female and children) from **forced or bonded labour**.
- Any situation where a worker is **not free to leave** due to debt, coercion, or withheld wages is considered bonded labour and is illegal.

Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986

Completely prohibits the employment of children under 14 in domestic work.

Restricts working hours and conditions for adolescents (14–18 years).

Many underage female domestic workers are vulnerable to exploitation, despite the law.

Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008

- Covers domestic workers as part of the **unorganized sector**.
- Offers access to **welfare schemes** such as:
 - Health and maternity benefits.
 - Life and disability cover.
 - Old age protection (like pension schemes).
- **Issue:** Limited implementation, especially for live-in workers or those without documentation.

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013

- Applies to **households** employing female domestic workers.
- Female domestic workers can **file complaints** against sexual harassment by employers or their family members.
- **Local Complaints Committees (LCCs)** at the district level handle such cases.

Key Challenges

- Lack of **uniform laws** across India.
- Many workers have **no written contracts**, making it hard to enforce rights.
- **Low unionization** and limited access to legal aid.
- Vulnerability to **abuse, wage theft, and long hours**, especially for **live-in female domestic workers**.

Categories of Domestic Workers-

As per the National Industrial Classification (NIC), the domestic workers are classified in the following categories.

Sr. No	Category	Meaning/ Definition
1.	Part-time-worker	Works for more than one employer for a specified number of daily working hours or performs specific tasks for each of the multiple employers every day.
2.	Full-time-worker	Works for a single employer every day for a specified number of hours, and returns to her/ his home every day after work.
3.	Live-in-worker	Works full time for a single employer and stays in the premises of the employer or in a dwelling provided by the employer and does not return to her/his home every day after work.

The Gendered Nature of Domestic Work-

The Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024, conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO) under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), provides comprehensive data on how individuals in India allocate their time across various activities. This survey is instrumental in understanding the gender disparities in unpaid domestic and care work, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.4, which emphasises recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work.

Key Findings from TUS 2024: Gender Disparities in Unpaid Work

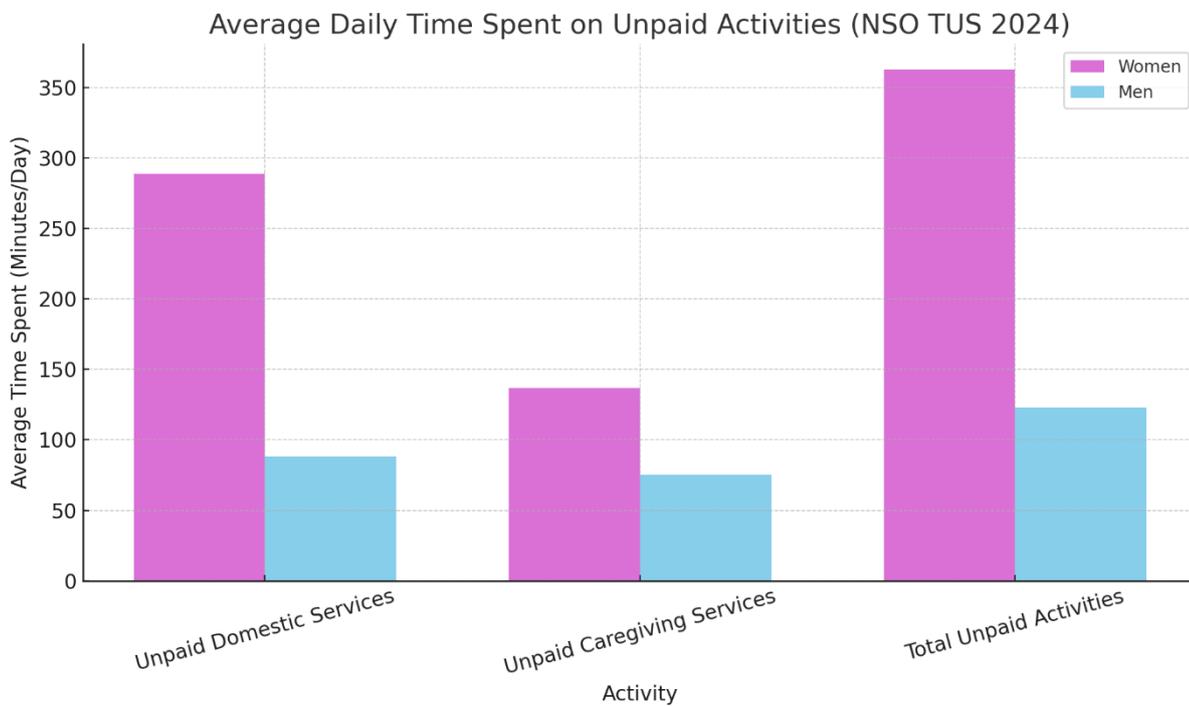
1. Average Daily Time Spent on Unpaid Activities (Per Participant)

Activity	Women (Minutes/Day)	Men (Minutes/Day)	Gender Gap (Minutes)
Unpaid Domestic Services	289	88	201
Unpaid Caregiving Services	137	75	62
Total Unpaid Activities	363	123	240

Source: TUS 2024 Fact Sheet, MoSPI

Activity	Women (%)	Men (%)	Gender Gap (%)
Unpaid Domestic Services	81.5	27.1	54.4
Unpaid Caregiving Services	20.7	13.0	7.7

Source: TUS 2024 Fact Sheet, MoSPI



Violence against FDW-

National Commission for Women (NCW) Data – 2022

In 2022, the NCW registered over 6,900 complaints under the category of "protection of women against domestic violence," constituting approximately 23% of the total 30,900 complaints received across various categories.

(The Times of India)

The majority of these complaints originated from Uttar Pradesh (55%), followed by Delhi (10%) and Maharashtra (5%).

(The Times of India)

Emerging Trends in Domestic Work- Role of Placement Agencies and the Gig Economy-

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of placement agencies serving as intermediaries between domestic workers and employers. While some of these agencies operate under the aegis of cooperative societies, trade unions, or voluntary organisations, many others remain unregistered and operate primarily with profit-driven motives (Neetha, 2009). These agencies often recruit large numbers of young, unmarried women, particularly from rural and tribal regions, many of whom have limited education and lack familiarity with local languages. Despite their pivotal role in the recruitment process, most agencies fail to provide basic support to domestic workers, such as assistance during illness, interim housing during employment gaps, or guarantees of safe working conditions. The absence of a comprehensive national legal framework to regulate these agencies leaves domestic workers highly vulnerable to exploitation, not only by employers but also by the middlemen themselves.

A notable recent development in the domestic labour sector is the growing reliance on mobile applications and web-based platforms for hiring domestic workers. These gig economy networks are often praised for offering flexible employment opportunities to women, particularly those marginalised or excluded from the formal labour market (Hunt & Samman, 2019). However, despite their expanding presence, most of these digital platforms lack formal dispute resolution mechanisms and do not offer employment contracts to the workers (Kasliwal, 2020). Although some of these platforms are registered and operate under the Companies Act, 2013, there remains no comprehensive national legislation to oversee or regulate their operations. As a result, domestic workers engaged through these digital platforms face legal ambiguity and potential exploitation in the absence of adequate protections.

Conclusion-

Female domestic workers in India remain an essential yet undervalued segment of the workforce. Despite their significant contribution to households and the broader economy, they continue to face systemic challenges, including low wages, lack of legal protection, and exposure to exploitation, both through unregulated placement agencies and emerging digital platforms. The absence of a comprehensive national framework leaves them vulnerable and invisible in the labour policy discourse. Addressing these gaps is crucial to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequalities.

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