

Domestic workers in the informal work-space: Wages and working conditions

Concept Note

In the present context in India domestic workers constitute a significant part of the urban informal sector workforce. However, most of such works go unnoticed in the sense that there is no formal recognition of the workforce; no documentation of work performed and wages paid. Almost no mobilisation of such workforce is visible. There is no formal contract between the employer and worker. They work on the basis of verbal understanding and nature of employment is purely temporary and informal. In fact, identification of employer-employee relation is technically very difficult in the sense that work is performed in domestic space and the concept of household as employer is still an alien concept in Indian labour market.

There are broadly two types of domestic workers: First, who works part-time in a particular household and caters to more than one household in a day. These workers perform specific jobs in a particular household like washing utensils, mopping floors, dusting, cooking, etc; Second, full-time domestic workers attached to a particular household and performing a combination of tasks. There is another kind of domestic workers who work as care workers at home. They usually take care of sick people/children and work in a shift of 12 hours. There are broadly two shifts: day shift and night shift.

Unlike most occupations in the informal sector, domestic workers include mainly women many of whom are single and heading the households. Even among the rest women members are the major livelihood earners in the family. Also a majority of them commute a long distance to reach their place of work. Educational and health entitlements are extremely poor. Socially majority of such workers belong to the backward caste, schedule caste and schedule tribe category. Thus overall domestic workers come from the vulnerable section of the society and are disadvantaged from the socio-economic point of view.

The unfortunate part is that these workers do not get the recognition of workers and a large part of such work is not documented at all. There is no official record of number of domestic workers presently engaged all over the country particularly in urban centres. Further these workers do not come under the purview of any existing protective labour legislative provisions. There are numerous labour law legislations but domestic workers do not get benefit from any of those. Protective labour legislations are based on the assumption that employer-employee relation is identifiable and workplace is inherently different from the domestic space. For domestic workers these conditions of employment are absent and it is difficult to include terms of employment in the way traditional employment is viewed. Explicit contract and standard work hour can't be applied with respect to domestic workers.

The fact is that domestic space has, over the years particularly since the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies, become the dominant work space. There has been large-scale decentralisation, disintegration of production process such that factory system of production is slowly giving way to home-based production structure. In such a changing context, slowly but steadily there is a recognition of domestic space being the work space. The issue of recognition of domestic workers as workers and their needs to be covered under protective legislations, has attracted attention of administrators, policy-makers, observers, practitioners and academicians in recent times. There are civil society organizations and a few NGOs who are working for the betterment of conditions of work of domestic workers. But mobilisation

under registered trade unions is not commonplace even though traditional trade unions have expressed their intention to broaden their coverage to include domestic workers in recent times.

With rapid increase in informalisation of labourforce and growing focus of labour administration on informal sector labour over the last decade and half, there seems to be some focus on domestic workers also as part of the informal labour diaspora. As part of such recognition some of the states have devised social security schemes for domestic workers and attempts are being made to form domestic workers welfare board. Such boards are supposed to formulate welfare schemes for domestic workers and implementation of those. Also few states have included domestic work as a scheduled employment under the Minimum Wages Act 1948 and issued necessary gazette notification to that effect. However, till date no state has determined/declared minimum wages for the domestic workers. The matter is still pending with the state minimum wage advisory boards.